

## James Kelman: A Resistance to Transfer

Aniela Korzeniowska

The furore over James Kelman winning the 1994 Booker Prize for *How late it was, how late* is well-known.<sup>[1]</sup> Despite the critical response to the award at the time, it is usually prize-winning authors – often the more controversial the better – who are primarily translated. Publishing-houses are only too eager to exploit the ready-made publicity in their own promotion of a translated novel. However, in Poland, neither the prestigious award nor the attendant controversy benefited Kelman in 1994, nor has it since. Despite his unquestionable position in contemporary Scottish literature and the fact that over thirty translations of his work have appeared world-wide, Kelman continues to be neglected by the Polish publishing market. The aim of this article is to address the issue of ‘the making of culture repertoire’, to use Itamar Even-Zohar’s term, in reference to the dearth of Kelman’s writing in Polish translation.<sup>[2]</sup> Taking into consideration the commercial imperatives of the contemporary publishing market, I ask why Kelman has been overlooked in Poland, in contrast to Irvine Welsh, for example, who, supported by the success of the film adaptation of *Trainspotting*, has found his own Polish cultural niche.

My answer to this question derives from reflection and discussions with a fellow-translator of contemporary British literature into Polish who, in turn, recently approached one of the publishers he co-operates with on a regular basis. Our intention was to propose a Polish translation of one of Kelman’s novels. The publishing-house in question is one of the larger ones in Poland, based in Cracow. It has a well-established and reputable series of literary titles, and over the last few years it has also been promoting a new series of translations that have been very well received. Because Kelman was not an unknown name to them, reaction to our proposal was initially positive, interest was expressed, and a request was issued as to a suggested work. Taking various factors into consideration, but primarily given the Booker award and the surrounding publicity, our final decision fell on *How late it was, how late*. At the same time, we were fully aware of the fact that a number of years had passed since that award was granted. With the

present international trend of publishing translations of award-winning authors within a few months of receiving the award – or even publishing translations of the works of well-known writers at the same time their new novel appears in their home country<sup>[3]</sup> – it was a risky business promoting a work, no matter how good it was, so many years after it first appeared on its home ground. We were also aware that Kelman's oeuvre includes anthologies of short stories, which are out of fashion with publishers at the moment, and also reputedly 'difficult' linguistic experiments that reflect his political stance towards dictatorships and the superpowers.<sup>[4]</sup> Proposing Kelman as a subject for translation in Poland seemed risky from the outset.

Unfortunately, our fears turned out to be fully substantiated. Before taking any publication decisions, a Cracow literary critic was approached for a review of *How late it was, how late*. The outcome was a highly appreciative critique, but also an honest recommendation not to undertake publication owing to a presumed lack of interest in such writing amongst the contemporary Polish reading public. Besides rightly noting that what caused the controversy around Kelman's novel when he was awarded the Booker Prize in 1994 was actually *passé* today, especially when one takes into consideration the fact that Irvine Welsh's novels are being translated and successfully promoted in Poland, emphasis was placed on the fact that critical regard cannot necessarily be equated with general acclaim.<sup>[5]</sup> While the reviewer fully acknowledged the literary merits of the work, especially emphasising the manner in which Kelman depicted the main character, Sammy, and the bureaucratic world he found himself up against, the author's chosen narrative style presented her with an insurmountable obstacle. Although generally very positively inclined towards Kelman, the critic admitted that she herself had found it difficult to get to the end of the book.

The publishing-house followed the reviewer's advice, explaining in a polite letter to us that they could not take any financial risks at present. They felt they simply could not afford the costs involved, given the strong likelihood that they would ultimately face a financial loss. And here it has to be admitted that *How late it was, how late* did not become a bestseller in the UK either, even in 1994. Despite the continuing critical success of Kelman's more recent novels, such as *Translated Accounts: A Novel* (2001), *You Have to be Careful in the Land of the Free* (2004), or even the Saltire Society's Scottish Book of the Year, *Kieron Smith, boy* (2008), we can presume the answer would not have been any different had we proposed one of these titles for translation.

What is of particular interest here is that the publisher's decision not to promote Kelman in Poland was based solely on the views expressed by one critic. We could not help but form the impression that any excuse was good enough for the publishers to withdraw politely from what they believed from the very outset to be an unattractive venture. This impression was only

reinforced by the fact that we received no further requests about any other works by this Glasgow writer that we might recommend for the Polish market.

In his influential article on transfer and the making of a cultural repertoire, Even-Zohar draws our attention to 'the relations between the processes and procedures involved with the making of repertoire on the one hand, and import and transfer on the other'.<sup>[6]</sup> Arguing that 'repertoire' is a major concept in the theory of culture, Even-Zohar goes on to explain that he sees the notion of culture repertoire as 'the aggregate of options utilized by a group of people, and by the individual members of the group, for the organization of life,'<sup>[7]</sup> at the same time elucidating his understanding of the making of cultural repertoire in the following manner:

The culture repertoire, although sensed by the members of the group as given, and taken by them for granted, is neither generated nor inherited by our genes, but need[s to] be made, learned and adopted by people, that is the members of the group. This making is continuous, although with shifting intensity and volume. On the one hand, it may be made *inadvertently* (1) by anonymous contributors, whose names and fortune may never be known, but also *deliberately*, (2) by known members who are openly and dedicatedly engaged in this activity.<sup>[8]</sup>

Relating the above to the 'inadvertent' making of the Polish cultural repertoire, we as 'anonymous contributors' were not given a chance to push our claim beyond some brief correspondence encouraging the translation of one of Kelman's novels. The 'known members' (the established Cracow publishers and literary critic), on the other hand, 'deliberately' refused to become engaged in this 'making'. These 'individual members', as Even-Zohar calls them, were neither prepared nor sufficiently convinced to make a contribution to the literary enrichment of Polish life. To fully understand the reasons lying behind these decisions, it is necessary to look back in time.

The changes in the Polish political system in 1989 empowered the country to open up to the world and had an immense impact on literary interests, particularly in the demand for the import of everything that was part of Western – mainly American – culture. The natural tendency to reach out for what had previously been denied has led over the years to the publishing market being commercially driven by literary products that will satisfy popular taste and demands. Indeed, publishing statistics show that, regularly in recent years, over fifty percent of new titles in literary fiction are translations.<sup>[9]</sup> These numbers, however, have neither fully encompassed the requirements of the more demanding or inquiring reader in general, nor have they, as we know, specifically included Kelman and his literary output. The resistance here first to import and then subsequently to transfer – if we are to refer once again to Even-Zohar's terminology – in order to become part of the Polish cultural repertoire is unquestionably influenced (1) by the power of

market forces, and (2) Poland's past, which, sometimes quite subconsciously, has an influence on what is considered to be 'popular' reading material today. This combination, as Even-Zohar observes, 'depends on an intricate network of relations, which may be labeled for brevity "the system of culture", which includes such factors as market, power holders, and the prospective users serving as a dynamic interface between them'.<sup>[10]</sup>

These factors, with the emphasis placed on what will sell and not the conscious shaping of a 'cultural repertoire' according to certain philosophical lines, have an impact on what is actually published. This emphasis on market forces, in turn, also influences the choice of foreign literary texts that are to be translated. Now that the publishing industry is largely commercially driven by entertainment value, there is little space in Polish culture for challenging writing that educates and stimulates thought. In the current context in Poland, what chance has a writer like James Kelman?

With even recent political events being for many Polish readers not only *passé*, but indeed belonging to what they genuinely feel is the far distant past and no longer relevant to their lives, it does seem hardly possible to interest more than a handful in such works by Kelman as his 1994 Booker Prize Winner or even his more recent novels, such as *Translated Accounts* or *You Have to be Careful in the Land of the Free*. Whether we like the idea or not, unfortunately we have to admit our sympathy with the doubts of the Cracow publisher mentioned above. And this does not have anything to do with Kelman's linguistic experiments as evident in *Translated Accounts*, or the important aspect of language varieties and accents – and their translation – as reflected in *You Have to be Careful in the Land of the Free*. Ironically, both of these highly political novels are relevant to Poland's recent past. Perhaps, indeed, it is precisely because they may be read as referring, if indirectly, to this country's experiences, with the latter work mirroring the current Polish *émigré* situation, that touches a nerve. The publishers and reviewers may judge that the majority of target readers do not necessarily want to read about matters that were until recently very much part of their lives, or even have reference made to what many are experiencing today. Kelman's work is anything but light entertainment in a market that demands escapism.

Having experienced Martial Law and the very difficult times of the early 1980s in Poland, as well as the period preceding it, Polish readers will find a great deal of *Translated Accounts* unusually and uncomfortably familiar. As an example, consider the following excerpt from Account Number 7 "lives were around me":

I saw the brains in this man's head, thumping on the shell, let me out let me out, I cannot stay in this job, it is not a job, how can a man live like this, I am leaving, I am going to Germany, to Copenhagen, I am told Oslo is good, in Amsterdam people have respect.

Yes, yes, go there. I go there. Why not Paris. Paris. Or London, Amereeca, New York, a fellow from our family's village was leaving to New York, our grandfather's friend, many years ago, our grandfather gave him a present in farewell, his shirt, very fine shirt, our grandmother was impatient with him, she said, You have no shirts for other people, he has a ticket to travel to America and you have nothing.<sup>[11]</sup>

This passage will clearly resonate with Polish readers as, for the last couple of centuries, Poles have been a nation of *émigrés*, leaving their homeland in smaller or larger numbers, for political or economic reasons (and sometimes both). This was very much the case in the nineteenth century and is no less true today. The destination simply changes, depending on which countries are prepared to take in the next wave of arrivals.

The same account continues to develop situations that echo Polish experiences:

Yes, and soon all attention was gone of individuals, frantically, oh what upheaval now waiters and customers, the disturbance proper had come from the designated building and onto the street, beyond proper eyeview, people crowding to the windows overlooking the harbour, all action, screams and more shooting, rapid fire, now pistol shots. We remained in our seats. Outside was further activity. I continued talking to her, she staring away from me to those who stood by the window watching the scene beyond, customers also, and securitys, I saw them arriving down from our side and further along men were carrying a body and many securitys now rushing here, there, to there, to here, again. We also were moving, up from the table, bag over my shoulder, leaving money for the drinks, the waiters by the door shifting slightly, one staring to us, them allowiing us to squeeze our way past, as if not seeing us, not seeing us. (p. 59)

Kelman's imaginative insight into the nature of a totalitarian regime is both accurate and acute. As Suzanne Hagemann has observed, Kelman's experiments with language, presenting the lives of his unnamed characters through fragmented 'translations,' only enhance the horror and tragedy of the situation described.<sup>[12]</sup> Looking at this work from the point of view of rendering these 'translations' into Polish, albeit an equally experimental Polish that would remain faithful to Kelman's intentions as expressed in the original text, it must be said that such a task is quite feasible.<sup>[13]</sup> The same linguistic manoeuvres are possible. The unsettling questions the source reader is faced with can also be presented in full to the target reader. But how many target readers would we have, even granting the familiarity to the Polish audience of the subject and the continuing validity of the problems raised? It is precisely because of this familiarity that there might be resistance to import, especially in Kelman's vivid but intellectually demanding form of presentation, as many readers – even the readers of literary fiction – would no doubt prefer to

forget the memories and issues that Kelman forces us to confront. This resistance to transfer accords with Even-Zohar's view that it is not only the goods or products, but also the 'images projected into society by the *people* engaged in making the repertoire, who are in the particular case of transfer agents of transfer,'<sup>[14]</sup> which undergo resistance.

If *Translated Accounts* deals with topics that are too close to be comfortable, then we might expect a warmer reception for that part of Kelman's fiction that has more universal themes. In many of Kelman's short stories, as well as in *How late it was, how late*, we see Kelman's broader empathy with individuals who are coping with a range of obstacles in the contemporary world. A recurring theme in Kelman's fiction is people's helplessness when confronted with uncaring, bureaucratic authority; we do not have to be subject to a totalitarian regime to find ourselves in such a position. Kelman's protagonists often perceive themselves as 'aliens' in so-called 'free' societies, as in the following passage from *You Have to be Careful in the Land of the Free*:

Some might argue that a Celtic male with pink skin, fair hair (receding) and blue eyes (watery) should have been empowered to travel the world where ere he chose and didnay need no colour-coded federal authorization never mind the okay from stray-born persons he met in bars. How can Aryans be Aliens, is what they would argue. It is a contradiction. This feller's physicality and language are passport and visa. And then add to the tally that I was an ex Security operative, how Uhmerkin can ye get! Okay, failed security operative. No really a failure, I just didnay make a career out it. But add to that failed husband and failed parent, failed father, general no fucking hoper. And now I was gaun hame! I was a failed fucking immigrant!<sup>[15]</sup>

Jeremiah Brown's 437-page interior monologue covers a single evening spent drinking the hours away in an American bar before his flight 'home' to 'bonné Skallin' for a month's holiday after being away for twelve years. His frustration with himself and his adopted country is all too evident, matters which many Polish emigrants trying to make a better life for themselves also face when away from home. Through Jeremiah, Kelman makes clear his sympathy with the individual and his antipathy to the mechanisms of the state:

So okay, if I got my Green Card, so okay. But I wasnay gauny fucking creep and crawl about it. How could you creep and crawl to a right-wing load of keech like the US State? If it wasnay for the individual population naybody would stey in the dump ... (p. 132)

*You Have to be Careful in the Land of the Free* is, then, a further example of a literary work whose content, one would presume, should be of interest to the contemporary Polish reader. Its concerns, centred on being an alien in America, with Kelman's ironic tone directed against US

imperialist tendencies, are matters close to many a Polish heart. At the same time, however, the average Pole may be much more pro-American than many other contemporary European nations, the UK included, mainly because so many over the years have managed to achieve a better life for themselves in the US. Neither does Kelman's protagonist – whose name is not 'Jeremiah' for nothing – escape the author's all-encompassing irony. In short, a novel that treats an immigrant and the immigrant experience with such ironic ambivalence is unlikely to win popular appeal in a country where the immigrant experience is so widespread and where it is seen as a potential means of improving one's life.

The readiness of future Polish readers to identify with the themes addressed so well by Kelman's fiction does not, however, mean that publishers and booksellers are confident that those same people would be prepared to buy Kelman's stories and novels in sufficient numbers to justify their translation. The experimental forms are demanding, the topics unsettling and the economic times are weighted against taking risks with 'difficult' fiction. Critical appreciation of Kelman and knowledge about his work and the position he holds in the contemporary literary world are, to date, simply not enough for his writing to be added to the Polish cultural repertoire.

To the thematic concerns may be added certain linguistic issues. Kelman's narrative experiments bend more or less easily to translation. The narrative strategies used in *Translated Accounts* and even in *How late it was, how late* could find counterparts in Polish translation, but this is less true of *You Have to be Careful in the Land of the Free*. The variety of accents represented in this last novel, often in Kelman's own 'phonetic' spelling, is an important stylistic feature of the work, and (as noted elsewhere in this issue of *IJSL*) the challenge of finding an equivalent of this kind of feature is highly demanding. No Polish commercial publisher has yet attempted to address the challenge posed by Scottish accents and language varieties.

Kelman is a considerable literary figure, often compared to other 'demanding' writers like Joyce, Beckett and Kafka. If his reputation is sustained, we can but hope that, in due course, the necessary transfer will finally happen and that Kelman will find a Polish voice that is successful in both critical and commercial terms. In the meantime, those of us who contribute to the literary 'system' do well to recall Ian Bell's observation in his review of *Kieron Smith, boy*: 'Most literature denies a voice to most people because most of the people who decide most of what you can read ... are not most people'.<sup>[16]</sup> We need to continue to press 'the people who decide most of what [we] can read' to realise that it may be worth taking that risk to bring out a work that, with the help of those other 'agents of transfer' – the translators – will make a valuable contribution to the enrichment of the Polish cultural repertoire.

## NOTES

[1] See, for example, Scott Hames, 'Eyeless in Glasgow: James Kelman's Existential Milton', *Contemporary Literature*, 50.3 (2009), 496-527 and Nicola Pitchford, 'How Late It Was for England: James Kelman's Scottish Booker Prize', *Contemporary Literature*, 41.4 (2000), 693-725.

[2] Itamar Even-Zohar, 'The Making of Culture Repertoire and the Role of Transfer', *Target*, 9.2 (1997), 355-363. This was first presented as a paper at the International Conference "Translations: (Re)shaping of Literature and Culture", organized by Bogaziçi University, Istanbul, 24-25 October 1996.

[3] A good example here is David Lodge's novel *Deaf Sentence* (2008) which appeared in England at the same time its Polish version *Skazani na cisze* (2008) hit the market in Poland.

[4] *Translated Accounts: A Novel* (2001) and *You Have to be Careful in the Land of the Free* (2004).

[5] To date four of Irvine Welsh's novels have been translated into Polish. In 2006, for example, the appearance of the Polish version of *Porno* was accompanied by a tour jointly organised and hosted by the book's Polish publishing-house and the British Council in Warsaw. Welsh had the opportunity to speak about his writing in all the major cities of Poland.

[6] Even-Zohar, p. 355.

[7] Ibid.

[8] Ibid. p. 357.

[9] From data gathered in 2004, for example, it appears that the number of published copies of translated literature even reached 85%, with 46.7% being American. See Krystina Bankowska-Bober et al., *Ruch wydawniczy w liczbach L: 2004* (Warszawa: Biblioteka Narodowa, 2004), pp. 54-55.

[10] Even-Zohar, p. 357.

[11] James Kelman, *Translated Accounts: A Novel* (2001; London: Vintage, 2002), p. 54.

[12] Suzanne Hagemann, 'Postcolonial Translation Studies and James Kelman's *Translated Accounts*', *Scottish Studies Review*, 6.1 (2005), 74-83.

[13] For more on the actual translation possibilities of this novel see, for example, my article "Tłumaczac przetłumaczone ... O zawilosciach przekładu *Translated Accounts. A Novel* Jamesa Kelmana" ["Translating the Translated ... On the Complexities of James Kelman's *Translated Accounts. A Novel*"] in Olga Kubinska and Wojciech Kubinski (eds), *Przekładając nieprzekładalne III* (Gdansk: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Gdanskiego, 2007), pp. 153-166.

[14] Even-Zohar, p. 361.

[15] James Kelman, *You Have to be Careful in the Land of the Free* (2004; London: Penguin, 2005), p. 20.

[16] Ian Bell, 'Mad About the Boy', *Scottish Review of Books*, 4.2 (11 May 2008), p. 5.